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SUBJECT: OPENING SESSION OF DINK MURDER TRIAL

REF: A. ANKARA 0144

1B. ISTANBUL 0387

11. (SBU) Summary: The much anticipated trial of 18 suspects in the January 19 murder of Turkish Armenian human rights activist Hrant Dink (ref A) began on July 2 in a closed-court session because the murder suspect is a minor. Following accusations of police complicity in the murder and questions about the conduct of the subsequent investigation, the case is viewed by many observers as a litmus test for the judiciary and Turkey's commitment to the rule of law, while bringing international attention to the concept of a Turkish "deep state." The trial continues October 1. End summary.

12. (SBU) The Hrant Dink murder trial began on July 2 at the Istanbul 14th Penal Court in Besiktas. Amidst heavy security (press reported more than 500 policemen), over 1,000 protesters gathered outside the courtroom, which was closed to observers because one of the defendants -- suspected gunman Ogun Samast -- is a minor (ref B). According to the Dink family lawyer, the 12-hour hearing featured the identification of plaintiffs and defendants along with their opening statements. The court released four defendants and gave procedural orders including demands for the presentation of key evidence. The trial is set to convene again on October 1.

13. (U) The case has drawn widespread attention, not only because of Hrant Dink's high profile as a human rights activist but also because of the intrigue and controversy associated with the subsequent investigation which brought to question government complicity in the failure to protect Hrant Dink despite awareness of the threats against him. The investigation also implicated a retired general and the Trabzon leadership of the extreme nationalist Great Union Party (BBP), and cost the jobs of Trabzon's governor and chief of police who were removed from office on claims of negligence and failure to perform their duties.

14. (U) Many observers view this trial as a test for the judiciary. All sides claim undue influence on the proceedings. Lawyers for the defense complained the prosecutor was pressured into charging the defendants with "gang membership" while attorneys for the Dink family have appealed a government decision not to pursue a criminal investigation into Istanbul Chief of Police Celalettin Cerrah's statements immediately following the murder, suggesting Samast acted alone.

15. (SBU) Comment: The Hrant Dink murder case joins the ranks of the 2005 Semdinli bombing and the 1996 Susurluk incident in putting the theory of a Turkish "deep state" on trial.

While the latter two cases played out largely before a domestic audience, the Hrant Dink trial brings international attention to the concept. We will continue to monitor this case closely. End comment.

JONES